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Exploring Gender Differences In The Use Of Discourse Markers In Iranian Academic Research Articles

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Abstract

The current study attempted to explore the role of gender differences in applying Meta-discourse markers in abstract and discussion sections of articles written in English by native speakers of Persian. A comparative study was also made to probe into the frequency number of hedge and booster in these two sections. To do so, 40 English research articles written by native speakers of Persian were chosen. Accordingly, Hyland's (2005) meta-discourse taxonomy was employed to identify the list of hedges and boosters. The results of quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that gender differences play a significant role on utilizing these devices in the texts. It was also found that Iranian males were more inclined to use boosters in their academic writing while Iranian females prefer to use more hedges to express the information they supplied. This study has pedagogical implications for the writing practices of non-native researchers.

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1. Introduction

Generally, the fundamental purpose of the academic writing is to notify the other academic researchers about the findings in a particular field. It is asserted that academic writing becomes more perplexing when the text has to be written in a foreign language. Hyland (1994) asserted that effective academic writing essentially is influenced by interactional components which increase propositional information in the writing and alert readers to the author's attitudes. In other words, writer's ability to supply the reader with a cautious analysis of the gathered data plays a crucial rule in effective writing or good article. In linguistic context, this is associated with epistemic modality which is defined as a mark of a writer or speaker's assurance or dearth of assurance in the propositional information

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that they supply for individuals (Coates, 1987). Authors can express their assurance in academic writing through the use of hedges and boosters (Hyland, 1994, 2000). Use of hedge and booster is considered as a demanding matter for non-natives in academic writing. Regarding the significant role of gender differences in academic writing, many scholars have increasingly focused on this individual characteristic (Chen, 1998; Parker, 2010; Shirzad & Jamali, 2013; Waskita, 2008). Moreover, although it is asserted that gender differences affect the use of metadiscourse markers in academic writing (Adel, 2006; Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993; Francis, Robson & Barbara, 2001; Tse & Hyland, 2008); however, far too little studies have been touched on the role gender differences on the use of hedge and booster in academic writing. Therefore, the current study attempted to explore the role of gender differences in research articles written by Native speakers of Persian.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hedge

The term hedge was introduced to describe "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1972). Hedges mitigate the writers' certainty about or reduce their commitment to the propositions, but boosters increase the certainty in the propositions made by the writers. According to Hyland (1998) the expression of doubt and certainty is central to the rhetorical and interactive character of academic writing. Its importance lies in the fact that academics gain acceptance for their research claims by balancing conviction with caution, either investing statements with the confidence of reliable knowledge, or with tentativeness to reflect uncertainty or appropriate social interactions.

In one study, Jalilifar (2010) investigated metadiscourse variations in the discussion sections of articles written in Persian and English and published in Iranian as well as international scholarly journals in English Language Teaching and Psychiatry. Based on a corpus of 90 research article discussions, he tried to identify boosters based on the taxonomies of metadiscourse markers. He found that there were significant differences in frequency, type, and functions of these devices in the texts. These differences might be attributed to lack of awareness of the conventional rules of English rhetoric, limited and fragile knowledge of academic English by Persian writers, or lack of explicit instruction and exposure to pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules of English by Persian researchers.

2.2. Booster

Boosters are basically considered as argumental devices which help the writer standardize his attention more to the proposition or to the reader by emphasizing or diminishing the truth value or writer accountability (Silver, 2003). The use of boosters in modeling persuasion in academic discourses has been studied by Vazquez and Ginger (2009). They analyzed the use of boosters in a corpus of articles from three different disciplines (Marketing, Biology and Mechanical Engineering). The results revealed that different disciplines showed different amounts of boosters in their discourse. On the whole, different rhetorical patterns in the construction of information shape disciplinary variation. In addition, they stated that softer sciences seemed to present a stronger need for enhancing the propositional content in the containing statements, while harder sciences relied on the exactness of the data used in their research as adequately evidential to show the truth of their statements.

Furthermore, Hu and Cao (2011) point out that hedges and boosters are important metadiscursive resources for writers to mark their epistemic stance and position writer-reader relations. In a comparative study; they examined the use of such discourse markers in academic article abstracts. They investigated a corpus of 649 abstracts to see if hedging and boosting strategies differ (a) between applied linguists publishing in Chinese- and English medium journals and (b) between authors of empirical and non-empirical academic articles. Result showed that abstracts published in English-medium journals featured markedly more hedges than those published in Chinese-medium journals and that abstracts of empirical research articles used considerably more boosters than those of non-empirical academic articles. Further textual analyses showed that the distinct patterning of hedges and boosters in Chinese and English abstracts had a joint, interactive effect on the authorial certainty and confidence conveyed therein.

2.3. Gender and metadiscourse markers

Some scholars focused on the use of metadiscourse markers, particularly hedge and booster on academic writing. Ädel (2006) asserted that gender has a significant influence on the use of rhetorical devices and writers' gender could impact on how much or what type of metadiscourse is employed. Crismore et al. (1993) conducted a study to investigate the role of gender on Finnish and American male and female writers. The findings revealed that Finnish females used the most hedges and US males the least. Moreover, Finnish females were inclined more to use hedges than US females.

In line with other researchers, Francis, Robson and Read (2001) and Tse and Hyland (2008) found that males were more emphatic than females and used a more confident writing style. If empirical evidences show that there is a consistent gender differences in many studies across different text types and contexts, then the result can propose that there might even be causal links to social or biological gender and the propensity to use metadiscourse.

In one of the most pertinent study concerning the role of gender on the use of hedge and booster in academic writing, Serholt (2012) found that females had more tendency than males to propose stronger commitments to the propositional information they supplied, but both males and females demonstrated a significantly higher use of hedges than boosters. Taking all the above discussion and research into account, it appears that there are still few empirical studies regarding the role of gender differences in employing these two metadiscourse markers in academic research article in general and in Iranian context in particular, thus it is required to conduct a thorough study and touched on this issue more comprehensively.

2.4. Framework

In the present study, the taxonomy of hedge and booster proposed by Hyland (2005) was adopted. All the devices include:

Boosters

Actually, always, believe, believed, believes, beyond doubt, certain, certainly, clear, clearly, conclusively, decidedly, definite, definitely, demonstrate, demonstrated, demonstrates, doubtless, establish, established, evident, evidently, find, finds, found, in fact, incontestable, incontrovertible, incontrovertibly, indeed, indisputable, indisputably, know, known, must, (possibility), never, no doubt, obvious, obviously, of course, prove, proved, proves, realize, realized, realizes, really, show, showed, shown, shows, sure, surely, think, thinks, thought, truly, true, undeniable, undeniably, undisputedly, undoubtedly, without doubt.

Hedges

About, apparent(ly), approximately, almost, appear, argue, assume, around, assume, around, broadly, certain amount, claim, could, doubt(ful), essentially, estimate, fairly, feel, felt, frequently, from my perspective, from my perspective, generally, guess, indicate, in my opinion, mostly, likely, mainly, maybe, may, might, largely, often ought perhaps plausibly possible postulate probable quite rather relatively seem should somewhat sometimes, suggest, suppose, would, tend to, typical(ly), uncertain, unclear, usually, unlikely, will, suspect

2.5. Statement of the Problem

The extent to which research article authors emphasize or deemphasize the truth value of their claims is one of the issues that have for a long time occupied the mind of the researchers in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Although many educational researchers approach to the use of metadiscourse markers from different perspectives and investigated the role of individual characteristics on academic writing; however, few, if any, studies probe into the influence of gender on the use of two metadiscourse markers namely, hedge and booster in educational context in general and in EFL context in particular. Moreover, the researchers could not find any relevant article in the use

of these two markers in Iranian context. Such gap kindled the researchers to explore the role of gender differences on applying hedge and boosters.

2.6. Research Question

With regard to what has already been stated in the previous sections and based on the objectives of the present research, the following research question is investigated:

1. Do Persian males and females differ in employing the number of hedge and booster in the abstract and discussion sections of their academic research articles?

3. Methodology

3.1. The Corpus

For the purpose of the study, 40 research articles which were published in international journals by Persian native speakers were selected. Among these 40 articles, 20 were written by male and 20 were written by females. These articles were in different discipline and were all experimental in design to help the researchers to have discussion section. Regarding the date of research article publication, all of them are limited to those published within the last ten years. It is assumed that time influences the style of the writers and with this time limit this factor is taken into account.

3.2. Procedure and Data Analysis

To explore differences in how the researchers applied hedges and boosters in their academic writing, all the abstract and discussion sections were gathered in two separated word documents for both male and female. More than 16,000 words were computed on each word document. Then they were counted through word finding application and then to ensure the correctness of the function of these words they were scrutinized manually. Then, the collected data were put in to SPSS software and the Frequency and Chi-square were run.

4. Result

In order to answer the Research Question, first frequency of hedge and boosters were calculate for both male and female. The mean for the use of hedge and booster for both male and female were computed. As reported in Table 4.1, the mean for the use of hedge (male, $m=16.00$; female, $m=17.25$) both male and female were higher than boosters (male, $m= 8.90$; female, $m= 6.05$).

Table1. Descriptive statistic (Mean) for male and female

Gender	Hedge Mean	Booster Mean
Persian male	16.00	8.90
Persian female	17.85	6.05

Furthermore, as indicated in the above Table, female ($m=17.25$) uses more hedge than male ($m=16.00$). Additionally, female women use booster ($m=6.05$) lower than their counterpart ($m=17.25$). Generally, both groups presented a considerably higher use of hedges than boosters in their academic writing.

To investigate whether this difference is statistically significant or not, Chi-Square difference test was run. As indicated in Table 4.2, Chi-square analysis also revealed a significant difference in types of booster and hedge employed by male and female.

Table 2. Chi-Square differences test between gender and hedge/booster

	Discourse marker	Chi-Square	d.f	Sig
Persian Gender	Hedge	40.000	2	.000
	Booster	28.941	8	.000

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the differences between Persian male and female in employing the number of hedges and boosters in the abstract and discussion sections of their academic research articles. Regarding the gender differences in using the number of hedges, it was found that female applied more hedges than male. As it was mentioned before, hedges function as means of carrying a cautious and doubtful approach to the statements being made. Employing hedges might be a strategy employed by the authors to “gain acceptance for their work” (Hyland, 2000, p. 179), as hedges provide the authors with the occasion for withdrawing the assertion at a later time. Therefore, it seems that females were more cautious in writing and reporting their opinions than their counterparts. One possible explanation could be due to the writers' amount of knowledge and awareness toward the use and role of rhetorical markers in their academic writing. This finding is in disagreement with pervious research by Serholt (2012) in which she found males used more hedges than females. One likely justification for such contradictory findings could be due to the participants' social and cultural differences.

Concerning the gender differences in applying the number of boosters, it was found that male writers were inclined to offer stronger commitments to the propositional information than female writers. As it was mentioned earlier, boosters were used to express a high degree of assurance in the significance of specific results. Moreover, boosters are considered as rhetorical devices to convey the author's interpretation as self-evident or as a generally accepted fact. One possible explanation could be that males generally intend to be more emphatic in expressing their ideas than females and employ a more confident writing style. This finding contradicts the pervious finding by Serholt (2012) in which she found that female were more inclined to use booster than male.

In conclusion, it was found that Iranian academic writers differentiated in the use of epistemic modality to express doubt (hedges) and certainty (boosters) in terms of their gender. Male writers intended to employ more boosters in expressing their statement than their counterparts. Furthermore, female writers were more likely to use hedges in stating their findings than male writers. In other words, gender plays a significant role in applying rhetorical devices in academic research articles. Additionally, it is noteworthy to mention that both males and females showed a substantially higher use of hedges than boosters.

6. Limitation and Further Research

At this point, a word to touch on the limitations of the present study is worth mentioning. First, as in this study only 40 research articles were randomly chosen, it is required to approach the generalization of the results of the study cautiously. Further study would be conducted with a large number of research articles. Moreover, as just one type of meta-discourse marker was investigated, it is necessary to explore the relationship of other metadiscourse markers and gender differences. Cultural and linguistic comparative studies are also encouraged.

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